

Treasure hunt goes 10 inches below the soil

By Roger Boye

When hobbyist Jerry Horacek searches for lost treasure, he doesn't have to dive for sunken ships in the Caribbean.

Rather, he simply visits a playground or park near his home in suburban Countryside, crisscrossing the earth with a metal detector.

"Just in the past three weeks, I've uncovered \$35 worth of [common-date] coins plus several silver pieces," he said on May 17. "Some days it's hard to find a penny, but other times I strike a mint."

Since his retirement from General Motors three years ago, Horacek has spent many hours a week—weather permitting—with his detector. The machine emits a signal when its electromagnetic field passes over metal objects buried at depths of up to about 10 inches.

When the detector "sounds off," Horacek uses a blunt-point ice pick and screw driver to remove the hoped-for treasure, always being careful to leave the turf undamaged. He also says he seeks permission before searching on private property, and he often checks with local officials before looking in park or school grounds.

"Some people buy metal detectors and then travel to Wisconsin to go hunting. The joke of it is that within a couple blocks of their homes, they'll have all the sites they could want, especially if they live in older neighborhoods," he said.

Horacek made two memorable finds in his own backyard, where he unearthed dimes dated 1833 and 1838 that probably were lost by settlers more than a century ago. But his most valuable discovery occurred in a Cook County Forest Preserve, where he pulled up a diamond ring that was buried about four inches deep.

"When I found that one, I ran—I didn't walk, I ran—back to the car. The ring had a beautiful one-carat diamond," he said.

Horacek soaks his "treasures" in soap and water to remove as much dirt as possible. He takes the common-date coins to a bank, and he trades the rarities with fellow members of the Midwest Historical Research Society and other people. [He doesn't collect coins himself.]

Detectors cost as much as \$800, depending on the type and accessories, but Horacek recommends machines in the \$250 to \$350 range, which he says often out-perform the more expensive models.